

## Star Wars

### Wizard's RPG Stories

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#### Sacrifices

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In the heart of the deep woods, the Tarasin practice rituals as old as the species itself. These groves of power are charged with primal energies challenged by the first mystics of the world's native race. And now a stranger comes among them to offer a shocking bargain. Learn more in our latest supplement to the Living Force campaign.

In the heart of the deep wood, the Tarasin practice their rituals of earth and sky. These are rites of an ancient age, as old as the race themselves and handed down for generations uncounted. The highest of these rituals, the vurgats, are performed in the most sacred of places on Cularin. These groves of power are surrounded by the eldest trees and ringed in standing stones charged with primal energies challenged by the first mystics of the world's native race.

The leaders of the Tarasin tribes sometimes meet in these sylvan sanctuaries for the vurgat, but only when their visionaries and Mothers see the ritual's importance as something beyond the norm. While the vurgat is always met with great reverence, they occasionally mark an even greater event - - something that changes the very future of the Tarasin race.

The vurgat held this very night is one such event...

She stood in the centre of the stone circle, her crests up and quivering. They were approaching from all around her, and the life of the jungle was coming with them. It had been many turnings of the seasons since so many of the elders were gathered here. Indeed, try as she might, Dariana could not remember a gathering this large in her lifetime. Perhaps in the time of her mother, or her mother before her, but not in recent memory had the heads of all the tribes gathered like this beneath the light of the stars.

She was mindful of the night revealed in her dreams, but she knew that night was still to come. Another vurgat would gather them all, even more than came now, but that was for the future. This night was not that night, but it was perhaps a whisper before the storm. Was this the thunder that somehow heralded the tempest she had seen?

They came now, the last of them. Mother Dariana was surrounded on all sides by the elders of a dozen tribes and their wise ones. The power of life itself was a ring of glory she could see - - could feel. The trees could sense it, too; as she watched, flowering fronds were opening as they would normally only do in the light of the sun. So much power was here, so much just in the presence of her race. It was a wonder to behold.

"Honored elders, I of the Hiironi greet you. You have come, unbidden by me but beckoned by the power that binds us all. I give thanks this night that so many have traveled so far. Let us raise our faces to the moons and give - -"

"No!" came the wizened yet sharply clear voice of Kaylanna, irstat-kes of the Nirrani tribe. "I will not greet the moons or any other here until I know why we have come. We agreed to your terms a month ago and have been working as you asked, but it is not yet time for the tarana-te'sath. Why are we here?"

Dariana sighed, the expression sending a slow ripple of violet and blue through her scales. "Did I not say, sister, that you come unbidden? I did not send for you. It was not even my turn of the wheel to hold this vurgat, but I, too, came at the Calling of Life."

The speaker moved to the front of the circle of Tarasin. Kaylanna's face was heavy with age, but her crimson eyes were still very bright and aware. "Are you saying you didn't call us, Great Mother Dariana? That it was not your voice we all heard in our dreams? Not your Calling that brought us from our irstats and our people?"

"No," echoed a voice from the dark side of the jungle clearing. "It was mine."

The entire gathering of Tarasin froze for a moment; even Dariana stood stunned in the moonlight. Then a frenzy of activity broke out around the edges of the group as Tarasin warriors raised their weapons and elders called upon the powers of life to protect them from this unseen, yet strangely ominous newcomer.

The shadow was a tall one, cowed in darkness that belied even the black cloth of its sweeping robes. Dariana could sense something there, something not quite of the light... but neither was it dark. She did not feel any hostility, and from the looks of the others around her, they did not either. Still, the warriors advanced slowly toward the stranger, spears at the ready.

"I mean no harm, elders. I want only to speak with you." The newcomer's voice sounded Human and likely male, but his words were in fluent Tarasin. Dariana was old enough and wise enough to know how that was accomplished; she could feel the force of life emanating from the shadow and touching the minds of the warriors nearby. She still did not feel any danger from him, but that level of sublime power was enough to confirm that perhaps this stranger was the source of the call.

The other Tarasin looked now to her. She was standing in the place of the Voice, the stone upon which the priests of the Tarasin stood to address those engaged in the vurgat. If she did not relinquish her place, the newcomer would not have the right to speak with them, but to do so for a non-Tarasin... Had that ever been done?

It took a moment, but in the end, the aged Mother let her instincts decide. She nodded, her scales flushing with a bright green, and stepped aside off the stone of the Voice. "You must bring only your heart and mind. All weapons must remain outside this holy place." Her words were backed with the power of Life, but Dariana had the feeling that she would not need to enforce

them.

She was correct. The black-robed Human walked slowly between the parting lines of warriors and elders, pausing only to hand a slender rod of onyx and silver to the highest among the assembled guardians. "A Jedi," Dariana observed quietly at the sight of the lightsaber. "This becomes more interesting by the moment."

The figure stepped onto the stone of the Voice. One gloved hand raised to his throat, undoing a silver clasp, and as he shrugged, his night-black cloak fell away. Beneath it, he was unclad from the waist up. His chest and back were covered in an intricate tattoo of Tarasin design -- a kir'ala tree with its long, weeping branches winding over his shoulders and arms. The work was elaborate, done in the special color-changing inks reserved for marks of true honor. At once, Dariana recognized the stranger, though only the tattoo revealed him. Everything else about him, even his eyes, had changed. Such sorrow.

"Gathered wise ones, forgive me for calling you here, but little time remains. If you will hear me, I must ask a favor of you all. I know what is to come, as do you. For any of us to survive to see the tarana-te'sath and the years to follow, we must ensure that life remains on this world. If the storm to come is one of fire, there will be nothing left of Cularin but ashes. I have seen the trees in flames."

His words touched the assembled Tarasin. Even Mother Dariana felt the truth in what he said. She had seen the dream all the irstat-kes had shared; now, it seemed others not of Tarasin blood had witnessed the approaching darkness. She almost wept at the thought of what her dreams had foretold; the Jedi's words and the power of life that flowed through them brought tears to her eyes now.

Mother Kaylanna asked the question most of them were thinking. "What do you want of us, stranger?"

The Jedi paused for a second, closing his eyes. "I know what has been happening to the young of this world, those with the gift of the Force."

His words sent another shockwave through the assembly. Dariana was not surprised to hear this, but it seemed like most of the others were. Their work had been done in great secrecy, knowing as they did that if their actions were discovered, all would be lost. That a Jedi had discovered them meant everything they had done was for nothing.

"And I want to help."

That was a surprise, even to Dariana. The others were stunned, but she simply reached out with her heart and dared to sense the truth behind his words. There was no deception, or, at least, none she could feel. But there was more. There was something he was not telling them.

"I can bring you others. Many more can be saved from the storm, if you will let me, and I will keep my Order from discovering your work. But..."

Here it comes, thought Dariana.

"My aid comes at a price. One I will have to pay as much as you will - - even more, perhaps. For the cubs to be spared, the parents may have to hiilau."

Dariana's eyes went wide at the use of the term, but then she nodded. That made a great deal of sense. The hiilau was an act of sacrifice. When predators proved too dangerous around certain packs of kilassin, several of the older animals would lure the hunters off, knowing that they would be killed as a result. The deaths would sometimes convince the predators that there was nothing left to hunt, and they would move on.

The speaker continued. "This world has many heroes, many that will stand against the coming storm. I ask only that you make it possible for those who believe as you do, in life, to feel what they have to fight for, what they might be called upon to die to protect. Will you invoke the shorda'ki?"

A smaller storm erupted from the gathering - - shock, at first, and then arguments as the elders recovered from the newcomer's audacity. The shorda'ki had not been called upon for generations, not since the last war among their kind had nearly wiped out the Tarasin entirely. Even if they could invoke it, and there was no guarantee that they could, it would leave the force of life on Tarasin greatly drained. Enough power might remain for the tarana-te'sath when its time came, but after that, Cularin would be almost dead in the eyes of life.

And at that, Dariana understood. She understood it all.

Above the raised voices of her people, she spoke. Her words touched her true power, and that force silenced everyone. "Yes. We will accept your bargain. We begin the shorda'ki now. Depart our circle, Human. What comes is for Tarasin alone."

The Jedi nodded, reclaimed his fallen garment, and took back his weapon as he returned to the shadows of the jungle. He did not remain to thank Dariana, nor was he thanked for his offer to help. They were both doing what had to be done, both acting as life would have them act. A moment's respect and a moment's pity were all that passed between them. No words were needed or given.

The Jedi paused at the edge of the clearing. The Tarasin were beginning a grand ritual now, the shorda'ki. His dark eyes followed Dariana for a few moments, watching as she led the rite with her typical aged grace and firm conviction. He wondered for a moment if she knew how much he admired her courage. Then he was gone, his silent silver speeder gleaming like a shard of moonlight between the blurring trees.